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BLOG: <http://aguanomics.com>

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Mr. Larry J. Prather  
Assistant Director of Civil Works HQUSACE  
Attn: P&G Revision, CECWZA  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 203141000  
via email to [larry.j.prather@usace.army.mil](mailto:larry.j.prather@usace.army.mil)

Dear Mr. Prather,

I am pleased that USACE is accepting (and considering) public comments on its planning principles. My comment is based on two public perceptions of USACE:

1. USACE has a reputation for building projects that are not cost-effective (benefit-cost), environmentally sustainable, or politically acceptable.
2. USACE, as an organization with deep military-engineering roots, has a top-down command and control culture with respect to project selection.

My reading of the draft principles and understanding of current events gives me reason to think that these perceptions contain a grain of truth.

It is from this perspective that I offer the following suggestions on how USACE could plan “its” projects to benefit the American People.

Each planning period will consider projects from two perspectives:

1. Has the project won approval from a majority of voters in the affected area? (Note that areas can be quite large, e.g., a watershed.)
2. Given that the project has won approval, what cost-share are the intended beneficiaries willing to support? Put differently, how valuable

is the project to intended beneficiaries? If one set of beneficiaries is willing to pay one-third of costs and another is willing to pay one-half, need we worry too much about the cost-benefit ratios of each project? If we did, which cost-benefit calculation needs closer examination? (The one-third local, two-thirds US taxpayers, obviously.)

Now I know that some will claim that USACE has to *impose* a project for the “good” of the people, and I’ve heard some places claim that everyone else should pay for local projects, but neither of these claims hold water.

USACE should only build projects that have local, political support. Within the group of projects that meet this criteria, USACE should only build projects with the greatest local, financial support. These criteria—taken together—maximize the return on taxpayer money and minimize the chance that USACE (or local grantees) will build projects that are politically and/or environmentally unsound.

Best Regards,

*David Zetland*